

The Value of Speech, Debate, and Theater Activities

Making the Case for Forensics

By Dr. Kevin Minch

Background

In December 2000, I was on a flight to Detroit after learning of my high school debate coach's passing. I received the sad call while at a college debate tournament. It was my second year as director at a small college in Missouri. Since I was in my third year as the associate editor of the *NFHS' Forensic Educator*, I scribbled on the back of some school paperwork what would later be the opening essay for our next issue. I wrote:

I recently attempted to explain to a group of my students . . . why I was willing to give up my weekends and evenings for no additional pay, why I was willing to sacrifice pursuits in the area of research that other colleagues consider "normal" for someone on a tenure track, and why I would want to carry the additional emotional baggage of being so intimately involved in the lives of 40 students. The answer, I explained, was simple. The gift I gave as a forensic educator is but a small down payment on a debt I owe to . . . those who made the sacrifices that made my education possible. A forensic educator is a very special kind of teacher, I told them, and we do not consider these choices sacrifices. They are personal rewards.

The passion of the forensic educator is great. Most of those working in the field have experienced the profound benefits of an education supple-

mented by forensics. I observed: "I would not be in the field of communication – let alone a speech and debate coach – were it not for [my high school coach]. . . . I owe who I am to my parents I owe what I do to [my coach]."

This essay is a condensed version of a booklet, published by the National Federation of State High School Associations, designed to help supporters of speech activities make the case for forensics in schools. It compiles research about the impact of speech, debate and theater, while presenting anecdotal evidence demonstrating how these programs work and how alumni have prospered.

While the reader will find many more sources in the full booklet, my objective has been to condense the best research available on the relationship between participation and achievement of various educational outcomes – the kind governments and school boards specifically describe, and the general life achievement objectives we all hope our students fulfill.

The Broad Case For Forensic Activities

Those who have assessed cocurricular activities long ago concluded participation has a positive impact on such important measures of a school's performance as GPA and student retention. Much of the research done to establish a relationship between involvement and academic performance relates to athletics. However, some generalizations are beneficial.

VanderArk noted in 1992 that 95 percent of principals surveyed believed that "participation in activities teaches valuable lessons to students that cannot be learned in a regular class routine" while 65 percent of students said that "activities helped to make school much more enjoyable" (VanderArk 26).

Those who have had contact with performance activities experience improved learning, both inside the classroom and in the context of what one might call "lifelong learning." These experiences satisfy needs that are not addressed efficiently by current curricula. Additionally, students experience positive outcomes in terms of occupational preparedness. Socially, students develop positively, learning group communication skills and exploring complex relationships. Participation in such programs promotes a sense of loyalty by alumni translating into a supportive community, good citizens and future parents.

What makes this difference? A number of scholars have advanced the "laboratory" metaphor to describe what forensics activities do that makes them different (Dean 88). Dean contended that the growth of programs, such as forensics, is the natural outcome of a desire by teachers to provide "developmental experiences." Other scholars have termed this type of learning "experiential" noting:

Experiential learning allows students to move beyond the classroom walls . . . [to] consider learning as it occurs throughout their daily lives. According to experiential education theory, learning does not come about only in

the traditional classroom setting (if it does so at all in such a setting). Moreover, people learn about the world around them via encounters with numerous symbol systems. (Sellnow 5-6)

Scholars have developed the laboratory metaphor, arguing that these developmental experiences boost knowledge acquisition in the broad field of communication studies (Swanson "Special" 49-50), enhance interpersonal communication skills (Friedley 51-56), strengthen the small group communication effectiveness (Zeuschner 57-64) and provide valuable learning experiences in organizational communication (Swanson "Forensics" 65-76) and mass communication (Dreibelbis and Gullifor 77-82).

The crux of this effect is the coach. While classroom instruction of speech is important for teaching fundamental concepts, a regular classroom schedule *cannot* provide the detailed feedback, rehearsal and polish that an after-school program can. The individual interaction with a coach, and the feedback of peers and adjudicators from other schools, multiplies the feedback.

Learning Outcomes

Students and faculty who have participated in forensics have generated voluminous anecdotal evidence of its value in enhancing the academic experience. A 1991 survey of college students in individual events cited perceptions of: improved oral communication and critical thinking skills, organization, research skills, improved writing and self confidence, the capacity to think quickly, development of a sense of ethics and a sense of personal accomplishment (McMillan and Todd-Mancillas 6-8). Among the most cited advantages are greater oral communication competency, improved reading comprehension, more highly-developed listening

skills and stronger quantitative measures of academic achievement. One of the most broadly recognized advantages is improved critical thinking.

Critical Thinking

A 2000 study by Buton, Horowitz and Abeles abstracted in the 2002 *Critical Links* report indicated that children defined as "high arts" (with significant arts involvement): "scored higher (from teacher ratings) on expression, risk-taking, creativity-imagination and cooperative learning" (Deasy 66). Studies as far back as the 1940s have established a fairly consistent correlation between participation in debate and higher scores in critical thinking (Bradley 135). More recently Norton observed:

A pioneer study was conducted by Brembeck on the influence of a course in argumentation on college students. A major conclusion of the study affirms, "The argumentation students, as a whole, significantly outgained the control students in critical thinking scores." More recently Gruner, Huseman and Luck investigated the relationship between high school debaters' proficiency and their scores on the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Tests. They found that the relationship between debate ability and critical thinking ability extended to all five subtests of the Watson-Glaser test. (Norton 33-4)

Researchers cannot know conclusively whether the improved critical thinking performance is the result of (a) good students entering debate first, (b) debate taking students and making them better critical thinkers, or (c) students being impacted by the broader design of the educational system, of which debate is only a part (Greenstreet 18). Nonetheless, the relationship serves as

an affirmation of debate's positive role, either serving the enrichment needs of gifted students, uniquely improving the performance of students, or enhancing a system already striving to improve student performance. Surveys of students affirm the perception of improved performance. Greenstreet reported: "A tremendous variety of former high school debaters attest to the value of debate training on their critical thinking as well as their communication abilities" (21).

Oral Competency

A recent issue of the National Communication Association's *Spectra*, reported that "the largest gap [between high school preparation and college expectations] exists in oral communication skills." The gaps in expectations exceeded those for science, mathematics, research abilities and writing ("Oral" 15).

Fortunately, students in speech activities enjoy marked improvement in oral communication. They also tend to be more confident performers. Colbert and Biggers identified research by Selmak and Shields (1977) that revealed "students with debate experience were significantly better at employing the three communication skills (analysis, delivery and organization) utilized in this study than students without the experience" (Colbert and Biggers 237). 1995 research in theatre by Rey E. de la Cruz extended this thinking to dramatic activities, noting that young students who participated in certain creative drama exercises "significantly improved in their oral expressive language skills" (Deasy 20).

Reading Comprehension

Catterall, Chapleau and Iwanga, in a 1999 study, reported that "sustained involvement in theatre" resulted in students performing better in reading. In

fact, “about 48 percent of drama students scored high in reading, compared to 30 percent of students not involved in drama” (Deasy 70). Catterall summarized many of the best impacts of theatre on reading when he wrote: “Research shows consistent positive associations between dramatic enactment and reading comprehension, oral story understanding, and written story understanding. . . . Studies of older children show impacts of drama on reading skills, persuasive writing ability, narrative writing skills, and children’s self-conceptions as learners and readers” (Catterall 60).

Several studies have focused on reading comprehension. Researchers have noted improvements in the capacity to understand and describe stories by acting-out. A 1992 study by Williamson and Silvern noted improved reading comprehension and improved meta-behaviors such as questioning and directing others among students engaged in dramatic enactment of stories (Deasy 54).

In total, the larger body of research compiled by Deasy and colleagues in *Critical Links*, describes an increased capacity of students who analyze literature by means of acting-out to retain information, negotiate meanings with others, and in turn, be able to retell stories to others. This translates, more concretely, into improved standardized measures of reading comprehension.

One study, found that students involved in dramatic reading and presentation exercises improved in reading comprehension scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and also showed a three-fold improvement over a control group in their “nonverbal ability to express factual material” (Deasy 36). Similarly, a 1992 study of remedial reading students in drama found that “when children have been involved in the process of integrating creative drama with read-

ing they are not only able to better comprehend what they’ve read and acted out, but they are also better able to comprehend what they have read but do not act out, such as the written scenarios they encounter on standardized tests” (DuPont quoted in Deasy 22). While much of the research into the relationship between dramatic enactment and reading comprehension has been conducted with younger students, intuitive connections can be drawn to secondary school drama programs or forensics.

Test-Taking And Academic Achievement

Catterall reported in a 1998 study of students actively involved in arts activities, such as theatre, that: “High arts students earned better grades and performed better on standardized tests. High arts students also performed more community service, watched fewer hours of television, and reported less boredom in school” (Deasy 68). Similarly, a 1999 study by Catterall and colleagues determined that:

More specifically, 57.4 percent of high arts-involved students scored in the top two quartiles of standardized tests, compared to only 39.3 percent of low-arts involved students; 56.5 percent of high arts students scored in the top two quartiles in reading, compared to 37.7 percent of low-arts students; and 54.6 percent of the high arts students scored in the top two quartiles of history/geography/citizenship tests, compared to 39.7 percent of low arts students. (Deasy 70)

As we have seen, involvement in speech, debate and theatre activities stimulates a variety of skills. We should not, however, allow ourselves to think

exclusively about high-performing students. Our schools are filled with students with special needs who struggle to achieve, or are starved for challenges. Here, too, forensic activities make an important difference.

Outcomes For Students With Special Needs

Retention of students is often tied to the interest they hold in education. A study appearing in *Developmental Psychology* in 1997 reported that: “Students who dropped out of school had participated in significantly fewer extracurricular activities at all grades, including several years prior to dropout” (Deasy 80). More specifically, a 1990 Florida study reported that participation in the arts kept students in school and that 83 percent of those surveyed said their decision to remain in school was tied to participation in the arts (Deasy 74).

The benefits for gifted students, through providing enrichment activities, seems obvious. Yet, the benefits for the learning disabled may seem less apparent. The learning-disabled student faces an entirely different challenge. 1995 research by de la Cruz concluded that learning disabled children involved in a creative drama experience benefited from improved social skills when compared with a control group. “They also significantly improved in their oral expressive language skills. . . .” (Deasy 20). This research suggests programs like forensics can function as a valuable supplement for learning disabled students yearning to experience success.

At-Risk Students

An area of notable success in the forensics community has been programming to address the needs of at-risk students. Debate programs such as Urban Debate Leagues have demonstrated that allocation of resources to under-

served communities helps keep students in school, stimulates community investment and private funding, and moves gifted students toward a college education.

In a theatre context, measurable success has already been observed. Horn published a study in 1992 for the National Arts Education Research Center exploring how a theatrical script-writing institute experience influenced the personal successes of inner-city students. Among her findings were improved attendance, increased use of school and public libraries, more prolific writing and improved self-perception and behavior. "Students increasingly saw themselves as leaders" (Deasy 28).

Occupational Outcomes

Students in forensics activities are well known for achieving professional success across a variety of fields. Colbert and Biggers pointed to a 1984 Keele and Matlon study that concluded: 90 percent of debaters have attained at least one graduate degree. 30 percent of their sample are university educators while another 15 percent are top ranking corporate executives. Ten percent are now working in the executive or legislative branches of government. They suggest that these ratios do not vary between those who graduated 25 years ago and those who finished within the last five years. It is doubtful that many other activities can boast of so many successful alumni. (Colbert and Biggers 239)

Similarly, a 1960 survey of 160 senators, congressmen, governors, Supreme Court justices, members of the

Cabinet and other political leaders identified one hundred who felt high school or college debate experiences had helped their careers. Ninety described the experience as "greatly helpful" or "invaluable." Twenty-six of the 60 surveyed who lacked debate experience indicated that they wished they had had it (Colbert and Biggers 239).

If we recognize that today's marketplace values a well-rounded education, critical thinking skills, communication skills and the ability to interact with people effectively, few activities can prepare students for the marketplace as well as forensics.

Social Outcomes

Involvement in forensics also has significant social impacts. These tend to manifest themselves in better self-esteem and interpersonal skills, but they also appear in the form of better citizenship behaviors.

Windes and Bradley both argued that participation in debate promotes tolerance on (Windes 100; Bradley 136). Bradley elaborated: "taking part in educational debate programs helps to create tolerance for other points of view. Not tolerance for the sake of tolerance, but tolerance for the other point of view because of respect for the logical, substantiated arguments upholding that viewpoint" (136).

Tournament competition is a socially significant experience as well, affording "students the opportunity to meet some of the best thinkers and speakers from a large number of other schools throughout the country" (Windes 103). Travel, in and of itself, is a significant growth experience.

A strong case can also be made for the impact these experiences have on citizenship. Windes continued:

. . . debate is a necessary adjunct to a free society – that it illuminates positions,

educates the public to the issues, and allows final decisions to be made democratically after the presentation of at least two opposing points of view. This in itself is perhaps the most forceful argument that can be made in behalf of training young people in advocacy. (107)

Educational Support Outcomes

Kenneth Anderson, a professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, noted in a summary of developmental research in forensics: "Debate tends to attract students above average in intelligence and higher intelligence correlates somewhat with winning" (151). For many schools, attracting intelligent students to extracurricular activities is an exciting end in itself. However, making students in forensics happy about their experiences is an investment in the future of the school.

One of the things that most impressed me about my high school's speech, debate and theatre programs was their consistent support those programs, and by extension, the school, received from those alumni who had gone on to greater things. A sense of tradition permeated those programs that brought alumni back to assist in coaching, to attend a play, or to contribute funds to support travel. The parents of these students were among the first to step forward to campaign for school tax ballots and bond issues and their students often became vocal boosters of education as adults.

How Does This Translate Into A Program At My School?

Perhaps your school is a school that does not have an active forensics program, but wants one. Or maybe you have a program but are facing ques-

tions about how to best configure them. The first, fact to worth knowing is that organizations and experienced professionals in the field are available to help you make a new program a reality or shape an existing one to be better, stronger or more cost efficient. In addition to resources made available by the NFL through this publication and its website, (www.nflonline.org) the NFHS Speech, Debate and Theater Association has plentiful resources available through its Web site <http://www.nfhs.org/>. Naturally, your local state association, or affiliated association for forensics or theatre, can assist you as well. Many states have materials specifically designed for the novice coach or the new school. Local universities are often eager to assist programs, sometimes helping teachers with volunteer assistance.

Afterward

The research assembled here is only a partial view of what these activities are capable of. Sadly, much of the research that has been done is old (and this essay presents only about 10% of what appears in the complete NFHS booklet). The reader will note that many of the pioneering studies on the impact of debate and individual events competition were conducted as far back as the 1950s and a lot of the best quantitative data has been done by educators in theater—sometimes prior to the secondary school level. As we are committed to the value of forensics, so too must we be committed to innovation in that very field. That means much more research is needed. As our students learn by doing, so too do we, as educators, continue to

learn by refining and investigating our techniques. It is my sincere hope that schools around America (and indeed, as is increasingly the case, around the world) will continue in the great tradition of our earliest schools, emphasizing training in rhetoric and performance for the sake of intellectual growth and improved citizenship.

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